



"Mr. Micawber with more shirt collar than usual.—Page 34.

## THE ROMAN BATH

By John T. Wheelwright

ILLUSTRATIONS BY REGINALD BIRCH



**R**ALPH TUCKERMAN had landed that day in Liverpool after a stormy winter voyage, his first across the Atlantic. The ship had slowly come up the Mersey in a fog, and the special boat train had dashed through the same dense atmosphere to the home of fogs and soot, London, and in the whole journey to his hotel the young American had seen nothing

of the mother country but telegraph-poles scudding through opacity on the railway journey, and in London the loom of buildings and lights dimly red through the fog.

Although he had no acquaintances among the millions of dwellers in the city, he did not feel lonely in the comfortable coffee room of his hotel, where a cannel-coal fire flickered. The air of the room was surcharged with pungent fumes of the

coal smoke which had blackened the walls and ceilings, and had converted the once brilliant red of a Turkey carpet into a dingy brown, but the young American would not have had the air less laden with the characteristic odor of London, or the carpet and walls less dingy if he had had a magician's wand.

The concept of a hotel in his native city of Chicago was a steel structure of many stories, brilliantly lighted and decorated, supplied with a lightning elevator service running through the polished marble halls which swooned in a tropical atmosphere of steam heat emanating from silvered radiators. So it was no wonder that the young man felt more at home in this inn in old London than he had ever felt in an American caravansary.

The shabby waiter who had served him at dinner appeared to him to be a true representation of the serving-man who had eaten most of David Copperfield's chops, and drained the little boy's half pint of port when he went up to school. It may be that Tuckerman's age protected him from any such invasion of his viands, but in justice to the serving-man it seems probable that he would have cut off his right hand rather than been disrespectful to a guest at dinner.

After the cloth was removed, Tuckerman ordered a half-pint decanter of port out of regard for the memory of Dickens, and, sipping it, looked about with admiration at the room with its dark old panels. Comfortable as he felt, after his dinner, he could not help regretting that he had not had with him his old friends Mr. and Mrs. Micawber and Traddles to share his enjoyment—the guests whom Copperfield entertained when “Mr. Micawber with more shirt collar than usual and a new ribbon to his eyeglass, Mrs. Micawber with a cap in a whitey-brown paper parcel, Traddles carrying the parcel and supporting Mrs. Micawber on his arm” arrived at David's lodgings and were so delightfully entertained. He wished that he could see “Micawber's face shining through a thin cloud of delicate fumes of punch,” so that at the end of the evening Mr. and Mrs. Micawber would feel that they could not “have enjoyed a feast more if they had sold a bed to pay for it.”

These cheery spirits seemed to come back to him from the charming paradise where they live to delight the world for all time, and it seemed to him that he could distinctly hear Mr. Micawber saying: “We twa have rin about the brae, And pu'd the gowans fine,” observing as he quoted: “I am not exactly aware what gowans may be, but I have no doubt that Copperfield and myself would frequently have taken a pull at them if it had been possible.”

His modest modicum of port would have seemed a poor substitute to the congenial Micawber for the punch.

Finally he went up to bed, delighted to be given a bedroom candle in a brass candlestick, and to find on his arrival there that the plumber had never entered its sacred precincts, for a hat tub on a rubber cloth awaited the can of hot water, which would be lugged up to him in the morning; the four-post bedstead with its heavy damask hangings, the cushioned grandfather's chair by the open fireplace, the huge mahogany wardrobe and the heavy furniture—all were of the period of 1830. Back to such a room Mr. Pickwick had tried to find his way on the memorable night when he so disturbed the old lady whose chamber he had unwittingly invaded.

So impressed was the young American with his transference to the past that his stem-winding watch seemed an anachronism when he came to attend to it for the night.

He settled down into the big armchair by the fire, having taken from his valise three books which he had selected for his travelling companions: “Baedeker's London Guide,” “The Pickwick Papers,” and “David Copperfield.” The latter was in a cheap American edition which he had bought with his schoolboy's savings; a tattered volume which he knew almost by heart; which, when he took it up, opened at that part of David's “Personal History and Experience” where his aunt tells him of her financial losses, and where he dreamed his dreams of poverty in all sorts of shapes, and, as he read, this paragraph flew out at his eye:

“There was an old Roman bath in those days at the bottom of one of the streets out of the Strand—it may be

there still—in which I have had many a cold plunge. Dressing myself as quickly as I could, and leaving Peggotty to look after my Aunt, I tumbled head foremost into it, and then went for a walk to Hampstead. I had a hope that this brisk treatment might freshen my wits a little.”

Ralph's sleep in the old bed was un-

and out, faded away, and Ralph found himself drinking hot brandy and water with Mr. Pickwick, in a room of a very homely description, apparently under the special patronage of Mr. Weller and other stage coachmen, for there sat the former smoking with great vehemence. The vision flashed out into darkness.



“We twa have rin about the brae, And pu’d the gowans fine.”—Page 34.

quiet. He was transported back into the England of the old coaching days, and found himself seated on the box-seat of the Ipswich coach, next a stout, red-faced, elderly coachman, his throat and chest muffled by capacious shawls, who said to him:

“If ever you are attacked with the gout, sir, just you marry a widdar as has got a good loud voice with a decent notion of using it, and you will never have the gout agin!” Then suddenly the film of the smart coach, with passengers inside

Then came deep, early morning sleep from which a sharp knock at his door aroused him, and a valet entered with a hot-water can and a cup of tea, saying: “Beg pardon, sir, eight o’clock, sir, thank you, sir.”

Ralph's first inclination was to say “*Thank you*,” but he restrained himself from this in time to save upsetting the foundations of British social life, and instead he asked:

“What kind of a morning is it?”

“Oh, sir, thank you, sir, if I should say

that it is a nasty morning, sir, I should be telling the truth indeed, foggy and raining, sir, thank you, sir."

All the time he was quietly taking up Ralph's clothes, which were scattered in convulsions around the room.

"Shall I not unpack your box, sir?" asked the valet.

Ralph stopped from sipping his tea to nod assent, and the man proceeded with the unpacking with a hand which practice had made perfect.

"This is my first morning in London," observed Ralph. The valet pretended not to hear him, being unwilling to engage in any line of conversation which by any chance could take him out of the station in life to which he had been called.

"What is your name?" finally asked the American.

"Postlethwaite, sir, but I answer to the name of 'Enery.'"

"Well, 'Enery, did you ever hear of a Roman bath in a little street off the Strand?"

"A Roman bath, sir, in a little street off the Strand, sir? No sir, thank you, sir, my word, sir, the Italians never take baths, sir."

"They used to take them, 'Enery, and my guide-book says that there is one of theirs to this day in Strand Lane."

The valet was silent as he continued his unpacking and arranging of Tuckerman's clothes, and the latter felt a little uncomfortable as this proceeding went on, for he was conscious of the inadequacy of his outfit, not only in the eyes of an English servant, but in his own, for he had purposely travelled "light," intending to replenish his wardrobe in London; but the well-trained servant treated the worn-out suits and frayed shirts with the utmost outward respect as he folded them up and put them away in the clothes-press.

An hour later, on the top of a 'bus, Ralph sat watching the complicated movement of traffic in the London streets, directed by the helmeted policemen. It was before the days of the motor-car, an endless stream of omnibuses, drays, hansoms, and four-wheelers, even at that early hour in the morning was pouring through the great artery of the heart of the world. This first ride on a London

'bus and the sights of the street traffic were inspiring, but familiar to the mind's eye of the young American. The Thames, alive with barges and steamers, the smoke-stained buildings, the processions of clerks, the crossing and sweepers, the smart policemen, the cab-drivers, the draymen, he knew from Leech's drawings, and he was on his way, marvellous to relate, to the oldest work of man in the city, in which the water flowed as it had been flowing ever since London was Londineum.

He got off the 'bus at Strand Lane and found a little way down the street the building he was looking for. It was a commonplace brick structure, the exterior giving no hint of its contents. A notice was posted on the black entrance door, stating the hours at which the bath was open to visitors. Ralph found out that he had fifteen minutes to wait before he could plunge head foremost into the pool. He walked somewhat impatiently up and down the street, finding the waiting unpleasant, for although it was not raining hard, the mist was cold and disagreeable. After a few turns, he came up to the door again and there found a young gentleman, dressed in a long surtout, reading the notice; the stranger turned about as Ralph approached; his face was smooth-shaven, his eyes large and melancholy, his whimsical, sensitive mouth was upcurved at the corners, his waving chestnut hair was longer than was then the fashion, the soft felt hat was pulled down over his forehead as if to ward off the fog. He swung to and fro with his right hand a Malacca joint with a chiselled gold head.

He bowed politely to Ralph, remarking:

"So you, too, are waiting for a plunge into the waters of the Holywell?"

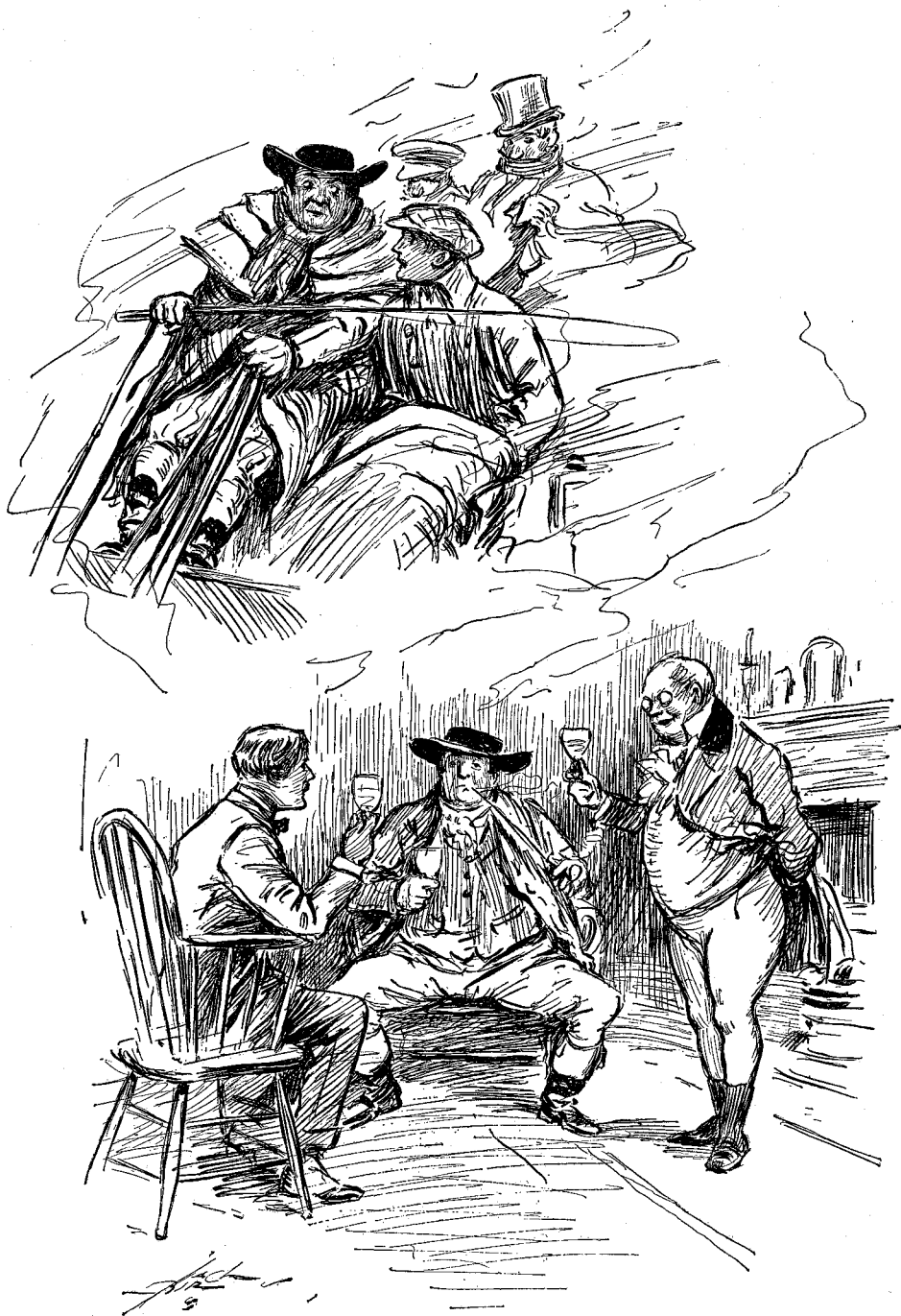
"You are right, sir; I guess that we shall find the Roman bath cold this morning."

"You are an American, are you not?"

"I am, and therefore, sir, I am a seeker after the curious and ancient things of this city; it is my first morning in London."

"May I ask how you found out about this ancient bath? It is but little known, even to old Londoners. I often come here for a plunge, but I seldom find any other bathers here."

"Well, sir, I came across an allusion to



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it in 'David Copperfield,' just before I retired last night, and I looked up the locality in my guide-book."

"'David Copperfield'!" exclaimed the young man with a low whistle, and he started off upon a walking up and down as if to keep himself warm while waiting.

A moment later the heavy black door of the bathhouse was opened, and the bath attendant stepped out on the threshold, looking out into the rain; a dark-haired, heavily built man, with coarse features, a tight, cruel mouth; if he had not been dressed in rough, modern working clothes, he might well have been a holdover from the days of the Roman occupation.

"The admission is two shillings," announced the attendant as he showed the American into a dressing-room and as the latter was paying his fee he saw the other visitor glide into a dressing-room adjoining his.

The bath was small, dark, and disappointing in appearance to the man from overseas, to whom the term "Roman bath" had conveyed an impression of vast, vaulted rooms, and marble-lined swimming-pools. The bath itself was long enough for a plunge, but too small for a swim, and a hasty diver would be in danger of bumping his head on the bottom. The bricks at the side were laid edgewise, and the floor of the bath was of brick covered with cement. At the point where the water from the Holywell Spring flowed in, Ralph could see the old Roman pavement. The water in the bath was clear, but it was dark and cold looking.

As Ralph stood at the edge, reluctant to spring in, he saw the young Englishman dart from his dressing-room like a graceful sprite and make a beautiful dive into the pool. His slender body made no splash, but entered the water like a beam of light, refracting as he swam a stroke under water.

In a trice his face appeared above the surface, with no ripple or disturbance of the water.

"I feel better already," he called out. "I passed such a terrible night, almost as bad as poor Clarence's. How miserable I was last night when I lay down!

I need not go into details. A loss of property; a sudden misfortune had upset my hopes of a career and of happiness.

"It was difficult to believe that night, so long to me, could be short for any one else. This consideration set me thinking, and thinking of an imaginary party where people were dancing the hours away until that became a dream too, and I heard the music incessantly playing one tune, and saw Dora incessantly dancing one dance without taking the least notice of me."

"I too dreamed the night through," thought Ralph. "And am I dreaming now?"

"I dreamed of poverty in all sorts of shapes. I seemed to dream without the previous ceremony of going to sleep. Now I was ragged, now I ran out of my office in a night-gown and boots, now I was hungrily picking up the crumbs of a poor man's scanty bread, and, still more or less conscious of my own room, I was always tossing about like a distressed ship in a sea of bedclothes. But come, my friend, plunge in, for if you passed any such night as mine, the clear cold water of Holywell Spring has marvellous healing properties, and it will freshen your wits for whatever the day may bring for them to puzzle over."

As he spoke he drew himself up on the opposite side of the bath from Ralph, and watched the latter as he took a clumsy header, his body striking the water flat, and sending great splashes over the room. When Ralph, recovering from his rude entrance into the water, looked for the other bather, he was gone. The cold water did not invite a protracted immersion, so that Ralph scrambled hastily out of it, and after a rub with a harsh towel, put on his clothes; then he noticed that the door of the stranger's cubicle was open; he looked into it to say good-by to his chance acquaintance, but it was empty, and in the corner he saw the Malacca cane with the gold head. He picked it up and carefully examined it; the head was of gold in the form of a face, eyes wide open, spectacles turned up on the forehead.

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" exclaimed Ralph, "Old Marley!"

The attendant just then appearing,



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Ralph handed him the cane, saying: "I found this cane in the other gentleman's dressing-room." The attendant stared at him and said gruffly:

"None of your larks, sir; there wasn't no other gentleman, and that's no cane; its my cleaning mop that I get under the seats with."

